The First Time I Was Shot At!

Some talking head said in reference to a professional athlete getting arrested at four o'clock in the morning: "nothing good happens between midnight and six in the morning..." What he probably didn't realize was anyone who's flown a helicopter at night, over the water a long way from land or a ship already knew that.

Since Navy helicopters generally fly below one thousand feet, full moons are a blessing. In the Navy they are known as "commander's moons" because they provide almost enough light to read. Back in the days before night vision goggles, star light didn't do much to provide visibility. If one was really, really lucky, the stars and moonlight could provide a horizon to help you keep the helicopter right side up.

The date was February 16th, 1970, and I was in Navy vernacular a 2P which is the abbreviation for second pilot. In Navy parlance, the unofficial word used is "nugget" which is a polite term for a brand new, first cruise co-pilot who knows nothing and is not much more than excess baggage.

So there I was... It was pitch-assed black as are most nights at sea, and we were flying plane guard. No clouds, no moon, air temperature in the eighties and water temperature in the 70s. I was still so new; I hadn't yet mastered the black art of maintaining a steady hover forty feet over the water.

We were boring holes in the sky at five hundred feet when this obnoxious warbling beeping sound rudely interrupted and stopped all conversation in the UH-2C helicopter. However, this time, there was not one but two, which even I knew the crew was from either an F-4 or an A-6. We were doubly blessed. Two rescues, one flight!

As per our procedures, I flipped the UHF radio to the homing mode and we got a bearing. The HAC (helicopter aircraft commander) put the needle on the radio magnetic indicator on the nose and accelerated to one hundred and ten knots. While we were accelerating, the controller on the E-2 (a twin engine, carrier based turboprop the Navy uses for airborne command and control) gave us a heading to fly and an estimate of the distance where they thought the F-4 went in.

Their vector and our radio magnetic indicator more or less agreed to the direction we were flying. The distance, however, was bit of a surprise because at fifty miles from where we were orbiting, it was roughly a half an hour away.

Half an hour there, half an hour back plus half an hour of fuel burned equaled an hour and a half. In a helicopter which had two and a half hours of fuel from light off to flame out, it gave us an hour to find the crew, hover to pick them up and get back to the boat. Piece of cake!!!

About half-way to the survivors, the pilot came up on his survival radio to let us know he was hurt and couldn't get into his raft. Both the pilot and his back-seater a.k.a. known in the Navy as a radar intercept officer managed to turn on their strobe lights. From five hundred feet over the water, we spotted both of them about two or three miles out. Their pencil flares lit up the sky like the Fourth of July.

After we finished the rescue check list, we descended to two hundred feet which was the altitude from which we should, according to the NATOPS manual, start our approach to a night hover. I looked back and the second crewman was sitting in the cabin door ready to be lowered to help the pilot. About a quarter mile from the survivor, the aircraft commander manually flew down to a steady forty foot hover, about fifty feet from the survivor to keep him from being blasted by the rotor wash. Down went the rescue swimmer.

I was concentrating my scan on the engine and transmission as well as torque gauges while the pilot flew the helicopter when we got a flash of yellow light in the cockpit. Suddenly the helicopter was hard to control. The master caution light was still out so I looked down at the center console between our seats and the automatic stabilization equipment or ASE "off" light was flashing yellow. The best way to describe trying to hover a helicopter on instruments at night over the water with no visual references is akin to trying to stand on a large, rapidly rotating greased sphere.

Now we had three guys in the water: The pilot, the radar intercept officer and our air crewman.

The manual said we were to "reset the ASE." Each time I turned the ASE on; it would work for a few seconds and then send random inputs to the controls. After the second time, I used my flashlight to find the circuit breakers on the overhead panel that controlled the ASE and pulled them out. I waited about ten seconds, and then pushed them back in. Nothing helped.

Without the ASE, we couldn't use the hover indicator which had two needles that if you kept centered meant you were in a stable hover. Think of how one flies an ILS, but in this case, a helicopter in a hover. It also had an indicator tied to the radar altimeter so with the needles centered and the height indicator centered; you were in a stable hover and not climbing or descending.

So I came up with the bright idea of using the fixed light that shined down and to the right with the moveable searchlight. I'd adjust them so at forty feet, the beams would converge. If they were in an "X," it meant we were too low, and if they were split apart, we would be too high.

The HAC said let's try it, but let's do it for fifty versus the normal hover height of forty feet. So, we flew along at sixty knots on the radar altimeter while I set up the lights. What we hadn't figured out was how to get into a hover. With no visual horizon and the black sea below, we had no visual references. To say we were gyrating around was an understatement.

Meanwhile, in the background, the pilot was calling everybody in the world telling him the helicopter wasn't picking him up. Finally, I fessed up and told the E-2 "Angel 22 had a stabilization problem, stand-by!"

We were too busy staying out of the water so I ignored all the radio calls asking for a situation report figuring we were having enough trouble. The last thing we needed was to spend time answering questions from someone a long way from the rescue scene.

What I found out later was the admiral's staff and air wing commander took my terse stand-by as "shut the f—k up, let us do our job." But those fun and games came later.

We managed to get the helicopter in a semi-stable hover and crept back over the pilot. As the 2P, I was shifting between heads-down to monitor the engine and drive train instruments and heads-out to help keep us out of the water. Off in the distance which was less than a quarter a mile away, we could see the strobe from the RIO. Despite several attempts from the E-2 and us, we couldn't raise him on the radio.

One of the times I looked up, I saw this red streak go by the nose of the helicopter. Having never seen it before, I didn't know what it was. I looked up again, and another one followed. This time, it passed only a few feet from the cockpit, and was followed by a third in less than a second.

Then there was a gap in time. As we were pulling out of the hover with the swimmer and the pilot in the cabin, six more went whizzing by. This time, the HAC, said those were tracers and someone is shooting at us. So that's what tracers look like!

The rescue of the RIO went more or less as planned given the H-2 was much lighter and we sort of figured out how to use the lights to gauge both height and drift in a hover. Luckily, we didn't have to put the swimmer back in the water.

Rather than being grateful he didn't have to wait an hour for a second helo to fly out to where he was floating in his raft, the RIO started screaming at the air crewman once he was on board. By now, we were back at five hundred feet and up to one hundred knots headed back to the carrier.

The senior air crewman gave him a spare headset and that's when he told us he thought we were going to leave him. He was out of pencil flares and his radio didn't work so in order to get our attention, he started firing tracer rounds from his .38 special. At first, he'd fire two in rapid sequence. When we didn't respond to the first three pairs, he reloaded and fired three in two batches. Each time, he was aiming to make sure the rounds went past the nose of the helicopter so we would see them. When we started to leave the hover, he was so sure we were going to leave him floating in his raft he emptied all five rounds AT the helicopter! Thank God he was using a stubby revolver with a three inch barrel and was not a very good shot.

This rescue, my first, took place about twenty miles south of the island of Vieques which is about eight miles off the eastern tip of Puerto Rico. A portion of the island was used by the Navy as a bombing range since World War II.

The story didn't end here. The good news was our crew was nominated by the Navy for the Harmon International Aviation Award. We didn't win, but it was gratifying. An Air Medal or a Distinguished Flying Cross would have been nicer but our Officer in Charge thought we were just doing our job and demonstrating how well we were trained! So, no medal.

Second, we had to explain our comments to the heavies on the ship who nodded sagely and then told me we needed to be more explicit. Right! In the training command, they teach you to aviate, navigate and communicate in that order. Aviating keeps you in the air and out of the water, navigating keeps you from a sudden stop in a cumulo-granite cloud. Communicating has a time and place.

Nonetheless, I still got a chewing out because they were trying to make the decision as to whether or not to launch a second helo and we weren't giving them any information. At which point, I innocently as an O-2 can, told an O-6, "Sir, you didn't need my input to make that decision!" At which time, what little was left of my scrawny ass was consumed.

By Marc Liebman

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